Libius Severus

(19 November 461 – 14 November 465)

EARLY HISTORY

Little is known of the origins of the emperor Libius Severus (sometimes, apparently incorrectly, referred to as Livius Severus). He was described in the Gallic Chronicle of 511 and the Chronicle of Cassiodorus as a Lucanian, and was said to have lived religiose (piously) (Laterculus imperatorum). Theophanes and the Paschal Chronicle report that he had the cognomen ("nickname") "Serpentius." As the fourth of the so-called "shadow" or "puppet" western emperors, Severus came to power at a time when the western empire was beset by a multitude of problems.

The emperor **Majorian** was executed by the barbarian Patrician and Master of Soldiers Ricimer on 2 August 461. The western throne then lay vacant for several months. The Vandal king Gaiseric went so far as to promote a candidate of his own, as reported by the contemporary Byzantine historian Priscus:

"Because Gaiseric no longer abided by the treaty with Majorian [of 461], he sent a host of Vandals and Moors to sack Italy and Sicily... Thus an embassy was sent to Gaiseric, first from Ricimer to say that he ought not utterly to neglect the treaty, and second from the ruler of the Romans in the east to induce him to retire from Sicily and Italy and send back the royal women. Gaiseric, although many embassies had been sent to him at different times, did not dismiss the women until he had betrothed the elder daughter of Valentinian (Eudocia was her name) to his sun Huneric. Then he sent back Eudoxia, the daughter of Theodosius II, with Placidia, her other daughter, whom Olybrius had married. Gaiseric did not cease from ravaging Italy and Sicily, but pillaged them the more, desiring that, after Majorian, Olybrius would be emperor of the Romans of the west by reason of his kinship by marriage." (fr.29: Gordon trans., p.118).

Here, during the interregnum, Ricimer is seen treating with Gaiseric on his own authority.

ACCESSION

Eventually, on 19 November 461, not **Olybrius** but Libius Severus was proclaimed emperor at Ravenna at Ricimer's instigation. Theophanes (5955 s.a.455) reported, "In this year Majorian was killed by Ricimer at Tortona, and on the nones of July Severus, nicknamed "Serpentius," was raised to the culmination of rule." The *Gallic Chronicle of 511* noted, "Severus, from Lucania, was raised to the rank of emperor and at the same time consul," although Severus' consulate was in fact not until 462. And Hydatius adds, "Severus was named emperor by the Senate at Rome in the fifth year of the emperor Leo" (*Chron*.211).

REIGN

Subsequently, Ricimer acted as the "power behind the throne" and assumed a role unequalled by previous generals. There even survives a bronze weight issued by a prefect of Rome with the inscription salvis dd.nn. et patricio Ricimere: "With the blessing of our Lords and Masters [that is, the emperors] and the Patrician Ricimer" (CIL 10.8072), sometimes thought to have been manufactured during the reign of Severus (see PLRE II p.436). More portentously, some of the bronze coins of Severus bear a mongogram containing the letters R M C E, which usually are thought to signify the name of "RiCiMEr." But several variants also include the letter "A," which leaves open the possiblilty that this monogram may have some other meaning.

Severus was never recognized by the eastern emperor Leo (457-474), and thus would have been viewed in the east as a usurper: the eastern chronicler Marcellinus, for example, asserted that Severus had "appropriated" **Majorian's** position, and referred to him as one "who had snatched the rule of the west" ("qui Occidentis arripuit principatum": s.a.465), and Jordanes noted that after the death of **Majorian**, "Severus invaded his place without the permission of the emperor Leo" ("locoque eius sine principis iussu Leonis Severainus invasit": Romana 336). By this time, moreover, the direct authority of the western Roman emperor was limited primarily to Italy.

Britain, Spain, and Africa had been lost, and Severus was faced by a revolt in Gaul, where an old ally of **Majorian**, the Master of Soldiers Aegidius, refused to acknowledge him. In 462, in a successful effort to gain the support of the Visigoths against Aegidius, Severus turned over to them the city of Narbonne, having found an ally in Aegidius' rival, Count Agrippinus. It may be in this context that a small issue of coinage in Severus' name was struck at Arles. Aegidius was killed in 465, and what was left of Roman authority in Gaul was shakily restored. Severus would have been responsible for the initial appointment of Arvandus as Praetorian Prefect of Gaul in 464; in 468 **Arvandus** was accused of treason, and even of having imperial ambitions, and placed on trial in Rome.

The carrying out of one of the few actions known to have occurred during Severus' reign was, typically, attributed to Ricimer. Count Marcellinus recorded, "Beorgor, king of the Alans, was killed by king Ricimer" ("Beorgor rex Alanorum a Ricimere rege occiditur": s.a.464), and Cassiodorus notes: "In this year, Beorgor, king of the Alans, was killed at Bergamo by the Patrician Ricimer" ("his conss. rex Halanorum Beorgor apud Pergamum a patricio Ricimere peremptus est": no.1278). The Fasti vindobonenses priores provide the specific date: "In this year, on 6 February, Beorgor, king of the Alans, was killed at Bergamo, at the foot of the mountains" ("his cons. occisus est Beorgor rex Alanorum Bergamo ad pede montis VIII idus Februarias": no.593; see also Jordanes, Getica 236, who wrongly places this attack in the reign of Anthemius; and Paul the Deacon, Romana 15.1). This Beorgor is otherwise unknown, but presumably was leader of some of the Alans who had been settled in Gaul. His attack on Italy would have been akin to a raid by 900 Alamanni defeated by **Majorian** in early 457.

Severus' reign also saw renewed raids upon the coast of Italy by the Vandals, whose king Gaiseric still hoped that **Olybrius** would become western emperor. John of Antioch reported,

"Gaiseric ravaged the lands of Italy wanting Olybrius to be emperor of the west because of his relationship by marriage. He did not make the obvious pretext for the war the fact that Olybrius had not become the ruler of the west, but rather that he had not been given the property of Valentinian and Aëtius. He demanded this partly in the name of Eudocia, whom his son had married, and partly since Gaudentius, Aëtius' son, was living with him" (fr.204: Gordon trans., pp.119-120).

It is in this context that one finds Severus' only attested diplomatic contact with the eastern court, as reported by Priscus, who noted that during his reign,

"An embassy came from the Italians and said that they could not resist unless they reconciled the Vandals to themselves... Tatian, a man enrolled in the order of patricians, was sent on an embassy to the Vandals for the sake of the Italians. Tatian, having accomplished nothing, at once returned form the Vandals, since his arguments were not accepted by Gaiseric" (Priscus fr.31-32: Gordon trans., p.120).

In this instance, therefore, the imperial efforts to restrain the Vandals came to nought, and the Vandals continued to raid the Italian coast. It was only in 467, when their raids extended to the Peloponnesus, that the eastern emperor stepped in and named **Anthemius** as western emperor.

A few observations may be made regarding Severus' imperial policies. As was traditional for newly proclaimed emperors, Severus held the consulate (recognized in the west only) in 462, his first full year of rule. In 463, he appointed as western consul the influential Italian senator Fl. Caecina Decius Basilius, who also served as his Praetorian Prefect of Italy from 463 to 465, an office he also had held under **Majorian**. In 464 and 465, however, no western consuls were appointed, and two eastern consuls were used. One of the consuls for 464, moreover, was **Anicius Olybrius**, who had claims of his own on the western throne. Severus' acceptance of the eastern consular nominees may represent a conciliatory attempt, albeit unsuccessful, to patch up relations with the eastern court.

Severus' coins were issued at Rome, Ravenna, and, as seen above, briefly at Arles: he does seem to have been able to improve the fineness of the gold coinage. A gold medallion in his name also is extant. Two examples of his legislation survive in the Novella ("new laws"), both addressed to the Praetorian Prefect Basilius and both disingenuously issued in the names of Severus and the eastern emperor **Leo**. Novella Severi 1 (20 February 463) dealt with inheritances: it nullified some unspecified provisions of some legislation of **Majorian**, but confirmed the stipulation that widows were not to alienate their betrothal gifts, which they held in trust for their children, and could only dispose of the usufruct. Novella Severi 2 (25 September 465) forbade children of slaves and coloni (quasi-free tenant farmers) from escaping servitude by becoming members of collegia (guilds).

DEATH

Severus ruled just about four years (pace Jordanes, *Getica* 236, who gives him only three years: "*tertio anno imperii sui Romae obiit*"), and died in Rome in the fall of 465. The *Fasti vindobonenses priores*, which give his date of death as 15 August, seem to be in error given that one of Severus' laws was issued on 25 September, although it might be possible that the law was issued posthumously. In the sixth century, it was said that he had been poisoned by Ricimer ("*hiss. conss., ut dicitur, Ricimeris fraude Severus Romae in Palatio veneno peremptus est*": Cassiodorus, *Chron*. s.a. 465), but Sidonius Apollinaris, a much more contemporary source, asserted in 468 that he died a natural death ("*auxerat Augustus naturae lege Severus divorum numerum*": *Carm*.2.317-8). *PLRE II*, p.1005, suggests a date of death of 14 November, but provides no evidence or justification for it.

Coin with the monogram RCME, sometimes identified with Ricimer.

EPILOGUE

The historian Priscus did not even deign to mention Severus' name, merely commenting, "There were, moreover, still other emperors in the west, but although I know their names well, I shall make no mention of them whatsoever. For it so fell out that they lived only a short time after attaining the office, and as a result of this accomplished nothing worthy of mention..." (*Bellum Vandalicum* 7.15-17: Dewing trans., p.69). Severus is eminently deserving of his place among the "shadow" emperors.

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